

ARTWORLD VS. AVANT GARDE

This is part of a discussion that took place on Frameworks, a listserv for experimental film. There was an extended discussion of the work of Matthew Barney, one section of large "operatic" project The Cremaster Cycle was exhibited with great fanfare at the Guggenheim. This is very large scale dramatic/theatrical film and exhibition work that is expensive to mount, and for which the artist is handsomely paid. Here Whitney Museum media curator Chrissie Iles explains from her perspective how the artworld of museums, galleries, collectors, curators, critics, and so forth differs from the tradition of experimental film. You can find the entire discussion on Scott Stark's website. <http://www.hi-beam.net/cgi-bin/flicker.pl>

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Date: Thu, 8 Jun 2000 20:12:03 -0400

Reply-To: Experimental Film Discussion List

<FRAMEWORKS@LISTSERV.AOL.COM>

Sender: Experimental Film Discussion List

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From: Chrissie Iles <chrissie_iles@WHITNEY.ORG>

Subject: Thoughts on the art world versus the avant-garde film

To: FRAMEWORKS@LISTSERV.AOL.COM

A few thoughts regarding the points raised in the current Barney debate. The context of the art world is a central issue in the current exchange of Barney postings. Matthew Barney is not working within the context of the film community. He is and always has been firmly situated within the art world. Following his medical training (evident everywhere in his films and installations), he trained as a sculptor. He also did a stint in the fashion world, and was thus exposed to that whole milieu from the inside. He is one of the numerous artists of a new generation who, since the nineties, have been drawn towards the medium of film, and was always an avid movie-goer (like Robert Smithson and Dan Graham before him in the 60s and 70s, for example). When he first started out he, Richard Prince and other artists met and rented films which they screened for each other in their studios. He is not, however, interested in the avant-garde film context; from the beginning he drew his inspiration from Hollywood (his work is particularly influenced by early Kubrick, and other work from Videodrome to Busby Berkeley). The fact is that cinema has become not the subject of, but the context for, much artmaking, which of course began with Warhol in the 60s, whose paintings were, from a certain point, as Callie Angell argues so clearly, largely generated from his films. One can also cite numerous subsequent examples from the late 70s/80s generation, from Cindy Sherman's film stills to Jeff Wall's cinematic light boxes and Nan Goldin's photographs and slide-tape work. The current interest in film by artists is even more widespread, and artists such as Barney and Douglas Gordon have begun to make films, (e.g. Gordon's recent film 'Feature Film'). See also Sharon Lockhart's films, or Pierre Hughe's new installation at the Pompidou Centre, Paris, in which the

hold-up scene from 'Dog Day Afternoon' has been re-enacted and re-filmed, with the original criminal playing the central role. What is the difference between artists working with film and avant-garde filmmakers? The difference is vast, and has existed since the sixties, when artists, following on from the experiments in film by artists made in Europe by Duchamp, Leger and others, began to use the medium of film to extend their mainly sculptural practice, just as Barney did later. (The new Tate in London, for Frameworkers in England, is showing one of Barney's best ever sculptures, an early piece which reveals a lot about his first Cremaster films made shortly afterwards). In the 1960s, artists, mostly sculptors, including Richard Serra, Robert Smithson, Robert Barry, Mel Bochner, Robert Morris, Lawrence Weiner, Dan Graham, Vito Acconci, Bruce Nauman and others in America and Richard Long and Gilbert & George in London, plus Valie Export in Vienna, began to make films, sometimes as an extension of a performance situation, in other cases, such as Richard Serra, a devout fan of avant-garde film, as a conceptual extension in celluloid terms of his sculptural ideas of process, which he then developed into an interest in social documentary. This group of films made by artists working with film was markedly different from the avant-garde film being made at the time, with only Hollis Frampton and Michael Snow (and Warhol for completely different reasons) bridging the gap. The arguments being raised now are not new. The art world and film world are two very different worlds, and only Snow and a very few others have ever managed to straddle both successfully - meaning, they were accepted and understood by both; (and it is interesting that it is now Lockhart and Barney who are drawing audiences from both camps). The market plays a large role in this of course. The early films by artists in the late 60s and early 70s were shown by Leo Castelli, the top gallery in New York at the time (who bought Nauman his first video camera). Film when used by artists has always, from the beginning, been supported, generated and presented by the commercial gallery world. There are fundamental philosophical, ideological, financial, aesthetic, conceptual and social differences between the two worlds of art and film, which will never unite, in my opinion. Barney's success is not due to the art world not seeing enough avant-garde film to realise that what he is doing is not original. It is original. But it has nothing to do with avant-garde film, and it is probably fruitless to try to draw comparisons. It speaks the language of sculpture, however obliquely. The current art community is generating work which references cinema all over the place, whether it's in photography, video installation, film installation, film, Iris prints, even painting. They do so because they are reacting to the world around them, as artists always have. This world, in New York at least, is a media-saturated, cinematically-driven world, and has been since the 60s. The word cinema is no longer clear-cut. The 60s and 80s in particular provided the dominantly commercial, media-driven material which artists re-presented within their work (Barbara Kruger and Jenny Holzer, for example). The art world is a post postmodern space, where everything can and does spill over into everything else (for good or ill). People from the art world come to watch Matthew Barney's films because they understand their context. And the cult of the personality in the art world has existed since Michelangelo, let alone

Picasso and Pollock, Warhol and Beuys. Furthermore, the viewing of avant-garde films requires a special knowledge, understanding and training of the eye, which filmmakers and students understand, but many art world people don't, because they don't have a training in the language or history of film, and the dominant mode in both the art and film world these days is Sundance/ MTV, which relates far more to their general experience and urban environment (again, no judgements about whether this is a good thing or not; it's simply a fact of life). The avant-garde film community is perhaps one of the few remaining independent, rebellious, ideologically driven outposts left in the current cultural landscape. But to find that Barney disappoints because his work does not correspond to the avant-garde film canon is like a mainstream cinema-goer being disappointed because an avant-garde film is silent, slow, or otherwise different from the standard cinematic form. Perhaps it is also time to think about new ways of presenting avant-garde film work, whilst preserving its integrity and understanding the importance of a dialogue with the other 'tribe'. As the title of British curator Tanya Leighton's new show of French artists, soon to appear in Scotland this Fall, states, in a quote from Godard, "Vivre sa vie".

For info on FrameWorks, contact Pip Chodorov at <PipChod@aol.com>.

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From: James Kreul <jlkreul@STUDENTS.WISC.EDU>
Subject: Re: Thoughts on the art world versus the avant-garde film
To: FRAMEWORKS@LISTSERV.AOL.COM
Status: RO

Chrissie,

Thanks for a fantastic post.

>What is the difference between artists working with film and avant-garde
>filmmakers?

This is a really important question to ask. Andrea brought up the same issue, in different terms. Konrad mentioned how my film studies context skewed my take on certain questions, but I will readily admit that this kind of question remains a blind spot in a-g film writing. What makes the history of performance art interesting is, in part, the distinction between experiments from the theatre tradition and experiments by artists from other

media extending into performance. But most avant-garde film writing does not seem interested in such contextual questions. Part of this has to do with "the experience will speak for itself" tradition, which has its strengths and weaknesses (I think my comments often make it seem like I reject this completely, but I don't). Another part of it, I think, has to do with the legacy of Structural Film (both the movement and the article), as it fit the particular needs of film studies as an emerging, distinct discipline.

Anyway, I also wanted to thank everyone else in the thread, too (even those who told me to give them a break). This has given me a lot to think about.

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From: "Jonathan C. Walley" <jcwalley@STUDENTS.WISC.EDU>
Subject: Re: Thoughts on the art world versus the avant-garde film
To: FRAMEWORKS@LISTSERV.AOL.COM

Chrissie--

Your post on the relationship (or split, as you suggest) between avant-garde film and the art world was terrific. I am currently working on the very issues you addressed in your post and reading and re-reading your email has helped me to sort out my own ideas on the matter, so thank you!

I wonder, however, if some of your distinctions, by which you separate the art world from the avant-garde film world, are too rigid. While I agree that there are important differences between those we consider AG filmmakers and those who come out of a visual or performing arts tradition and use film, that distinction may serve to mask key thematic and formal overlaps, cross-influencing, and a shared artistic heritage.

For example, you wrote:

"What is the difference

>between artists working with film and avant-garde filmmakers? The difference
>is vast, and has existed since the sixties, when artists, following on from

>the experiments in film by artists made in Europe by Duchamp, Leger and
>others, began to use the medium of film to extend their mainly sculptural
>practice, just as Barney did later."

I think it is important to mention that the first wave of European modernists (like Duchamp, Leger, Moholy-Nagy, Richter, Eggeling, etc.) who experimented with film are not only the precursors to the tradition of visual artists using film, but were also taken by the film historians and practicing filmmakers as the "first wave" of avant-garde cinema. In other words, I would not just posit them as the ancestors of people like Barney (and before him Smithson, Serra, Morris, etc), but as the common ancestors of both the avant-garde in film and in the visual and performing arts. If this is the case, then surely both sides of the AGF/art world split have more to do with one another thematically, stylistically, formally, ideologically, than you allow.

You also wrote:

"The current art community is generating work
>which references cinema all over the place, whether it's in photography,
>video installation, film installation, film, Iris prints, even painting.
>They do so because they are reacting to the world around them, as artists
>always have. This world, in New York at least, is a media-saturated,
>cinematically-driven world, and has been since the 60s."

This is a very important point. I think you are right to suggest that artists often take cinema as a socio-cultural phenomenon to respond to in their work (that is, how cinema "meant" in the popular social context), whereas the avant-garde filmmakers of the sixties, given the dominance of purist, reflexive ideas, were less interested in cinema as signifier of media-saturated pop culture and more in cinema's material essences. At the same time, however, I'm not sure if the reason you mention above that artists use film is the only, or even the primary, reason, especially in so far as the sixties are concerned. It seems to me that, during the fifties and sixties, there emerged a cluster of ideas that the cinema could embody very well, perhaps better than other arts (at least in the minds of artists and filmmakers). A preoccupation with space, duration, and performance (very broad notions of performance which relate more to happenings, events, and later installations than to "the theater") all mark the sixties avant-garde in the visual arts and in performance, and suggest to me one reason that so many artists turned to film during the sixties, and laid the groundwork for the tradition of film and video based installation and performance art that was to follow (and has continued into the present). This is something that connects, say, the films of Warhol to those of Morris, even though the latter was not working in the avant-garde film context.

This is why I can't fully agree when you write:

"There are fundamental
>philosophical, ideological, financial, aesthetic, conceptual and social

>differences between the two worlds of art and film, which will never unite,
>in my opinion."

I agree that both the market (as you suggest) and critical rhetoric (on the part of both scholars and filmmaker-theorists) has served to separate those two worlds. In the latter, for example, it is my opinion that the dominance of essentialist, materialist film criticism has functioned to maintain clear-cut distinctions between film and the other arts, especially at a time (60s and 70s) when there was so much overlap between the two in the realm of ideas (if not in criticism or the marketplace). While Warhol and Snow were accepted by the film avant-garde (and canonized by the Film Culture crowd) folks like Morris and Bruce Nauman were not. Obviously the former were more aware of avant-garde film history than the latter (having attended screenings of the FMC), but that history is not as isolated from art history as critical studies of avant-garde film let on. The categories that keep these people distinct from one another are, in part, discursive constructs which hide as much as they reveal.

My remarks here are schematic and, as I mentioned at the outset, are still in progress. If I continued much further this would turn into an essay. I would be very interested to read your thoughts on these issues (as well as those of other frameworkers--the agf/art world discussion seems to have dried up all of a sudden). The relationship between these two worlds--on the level of practice, theory and criticism, the market, and the academy--is a critical one for both art history and film scholars, and is one that has been almost totally ignored. I am interested in why this is, and in what and where the connections are.

Thanks again for an amazing and thought-provoking post.

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Reply-To: Experimental Film Discussion List
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From: "Michael J. Sicinski" <sicinski@UCLINK4.BERKELEY.EDU>
Subject: Re: Thoughts on the art world versus the avant-garde film
To: FRAMEWORKS@LISTSERV.AOL.COM

Jonathan C. Walley wrote:

>I agree that both the market (as you suggest) and critical rhetoric (on the
>part of both scholars and filmmaker-theorists) has served to separate those
>two worlds. In the latter, for example, it is my opinion that the
>dominance of essentialist, materialist film criticism has functioned to
>maintain clear-cut distinctions between film and the other arts, especially
>at a time (60s and 70s) when there was so much overlap between the two in
>the realm of ideas (if not in criticism or the marketplace).

I think this is true, and certain elisions in scholarship seem to have kept this overlap out of consideration. Chrissie, you cited Snow, Warhol and Frampton as figures who could bridge the divide between avant-garde film and the art world. But if we reconsider Yoko Ono, that shows how some factionalism occurs within criticism and reception which might distract from instructive similarities in the work itself. Not only has she been slighted by art history for, well, being Yoko Ono, but from the standpoint of film studies, her affiliation with fluxus has sort of sidelined her. While no one would deny the vital role of fluxus in 1960s experimental art and film, a strict materialist history of cinema must elide fluxus. It's too messy, not essential enough. (Let's recall Maciunas's truth-table addendum to Sitney's article on structural film, in which he rebutted Sitney's categories in favor of broader ones which would accommodate expanded cinema work.)

The mixed media environment of this period is astonishing, and it seems that maybe the best way to understand some films from the period is to consider them next to the various arts of that time, if not "the art world" per se. For instance, have the graphic relationships between Robert Breer and Rauschenberg been explored? What if we consider Brakhage's MOTHLIGHT a sculpture instead of a film? What was going on around him in sculpture and collage? Can Bruce Conner possibly be comprehended *strictly* as a filmmaker? What kind of knowledge is lost or gained if we do? What can we make of the fact that J.J. Murphy's PRINT GENERATION and Alvin Lucier's I AM SITTING IN A ROOM deploy nearly identical strategies, only one does it in film, the other in music?

To bring this back around to Barney, I saw CREMASTER 2, and I must say I was quite impressed with the film / installation. I think Chrissie is absolutely correct about his larger film-world influences and references. In C2, one extended sequence combines visual allusions to both 2001 and KISS ME DEADLY, to stunning effect. And yes, clearly Barney is working within a sculptural idiom, and uses the film to provoke unexpected spatial relationships with his sculptural objects. The opening sequence is a black field, broken by the emergence of a massive-looking silver structure, which soon resembles a curvilinear Saarinen building. Eventually we realize that we're looking at the small mirror-covered saddle that's outside in the gallery. The film

continually forces the viewer to see these objects in space in ways which go against our normal mode of interacting with a sculptural object.

But I think this extends to the physical materials of the apparatus as well. Most importantly, CREMASTER 2 continually draws attention to the screen as a spatial, sculptural object, and manages to warp our vision of the screen to fascinating effect. The major motif of the film is the hexagon, which refers most directly to honeycombs in a beehive. Continually throughout the film, Barney introduces forms which subtly play against the corners of the screen. He does this by depicting objects like the saddle, which anchor the corners but flare out into curves. He also moves the camera off the straight-on angles when shooting windows and doorframes, angling at just under 45 degrees so as to produce "keystoning" distortion. In all these moves, he optically manipulates our vision of the screen. He keeps making it look like a hexagon, only to resolve back into our good old familiar rectangle.

The film manages to warp our vision of the screen. The bleachers are also at an angle, preventing any viewer from sitting at 90 degrees to the screen as accustomed. (Well, you CAN do it -- I did -- but it kills your back.) Sure, this is sculptural -- it recalls Morris, Judd, Nauman, all the folks Michael Fried lambasted -- but it also relates to Frampton, Le Grice, Owen Land, Conrad, and numerous others who've taken the screen as a physical object to be dealt with as a compositional parameter. Attempting to think these precedents together is worthwhile, since it will perhaps dramatize what's so interesting about Barney.

Thanks, Chrissie and Jonathan, for the very educational posts.

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From: Bryan Donnell <BLDonnell@AOL.COM>

Subject: Re: Thoughts on the art world versus the avant-garde film

To: FRAMEWORKS@LISTSERV.AOL.COM

In a message dated 6/15/2000 1:41:55 AM, sicinski@UCLINK4.BERKELEY.EDU writes:

<< While no one
would deny the vital role of fluxus in 1960s experimental art and film, a
strict materialist history of cinema must elide fluxus. It's too messy, not
essential enough. >>

made me remember how in art history classes in college we would rarely hear
anything about Paul Klee or Modigliani, or Chagall if I remember right. not
essential enough I guess, started no movements.

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